

Internal Data on the United States Government's Immediate Reaction to the Assassination

by *E. Martin Schotz*

In November of 1966, in the course of reading Theodore H. White's *The Making of the President, 1964*, Vincent Salandria came across an important revelation. On [page 9](#) of this book [New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965] Salandria learned that:

There is a tape recording in the archives of the government which best recaptures the sound of the hours as it waited for leadership. It is a recording of all the conversations in the air, monitored by the Signal Corps Midwestern center "Liberty," between Air Force One in Dallas, the Cabinet plane over the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs communications center and the White House communications center in Washington.

Then on [page 33](#), Salandria found the following, concerning the flight back to Washington, D.C. from Dallas of the Presidential party aboard Air Force One, on November 22, 1963:

On the flight the party learned that there was no conspiracy; learned of the identity of Oswald and his arrest; and the President's mind turned to the duties of consoling the stricken and guiding the quick.

On November 23, 1963, *The Dallas Morning News* had informed its readers that [according to District Attorney Henry Wade](#):

preliminary reports indicated more than one person was involved in the shooting ... [t]he electric chair is too good for the killers.

In [Volume 1, page 149](#) of [the twenty-six volumes of Warren Commission exhibits](#), one learns from Marina Oswald's testimony that on Saturday, November 23rd, while waiting to see her husband:

One of the men came by and said, "I am sorry that we are going to be delayed in letting you see Lee, ... we have picked up another suspect."

And yet the White House had informed President Johnson and the other occupants of Air Force One, all of them witnesses to the hail of bullets which had poured down on Dealey Plaza, that as of the afternoon of the assassination there was to be no conspiracy and that Oswald was to be the lone assassin. If White's report were correct this would mean that federal officials in Washington were

marrying the government to the cover-up of Oswald as the lone assassin virtually instantaneously. This could have occurred only if those federal officials had had foreknowledge that the evidence would implicate Oswald and that he would have “no confederates.” An innocent government could not have reacted in such a fashion internally.

Salandria wrote immediately to White:

Can you find time to advise in brief the source of the following information which appears on page 48 of your book?

On the flight the party learned that there was no conspiracy; learned of the identity of Oswald and his arrest; and the President’s mind turned to the duties of consoling the stricken and guiding the quick.

I would much appreciate you providing the source of this information and a designation of the nature of the Communication to Air Force One, i.e. whether it was commercial T.V., government radio or whatever.

Please be advised that I have undertaken a very meticulous analysis of [Warren Commission data](#) and have written [a number of articles on the subject....](#)

Very truly yours,
(signed)
Vincent J.
Salandria

White returned Salandria’s letter, indicating awareness of Salandria’s writings and penning at the bottom of the letter the following: “By government radio — all relays go through a big Signal Corps center in the Midwest — and the White House was in constant communications with the plane. (Signed) T. H. White.”

Salandria wrote immediately to Dr. Robert Bahmer, Archivist of the United States, requesting access to the tape. But Bahmer replied:

We have no knowledge of the existence or location of the tape recording mentioned by Mr. White, despite having made some efforts since the receipt of your letter to obtain some information about it.

Salandria next wrote to Pierre Salinger on December 3, 1966:

In your fine work, *With Kennedy*, you make mention of radio communications with the White House and the cabinet plane over the Pacific on November 22, 1963 (pp. 5-8). You identify “Stranger” as Major Harold R. Patterson.

Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1964*, also refers to these conversations but particularly related to those dialogues with the Presidential plane, Air Force One.

I have asked the National Archives for a copy of this tape. Dr. Bahmer, the excellent Archivist of the United States, cannot locate it, although Mr. White states on page 21 of his book: "There is a tape recording in the archives of the government." I enclose Dr. Bahmer's letter. Mr. White will not provide any further information.

Specifically what I am about is the verification of what Mr. White stated was on the tape, to wit: "On the flight the party learned that there was no conspiracy; learned of the identity of Oswald and his arrest; and the President's mind turned to the duties of consoling the stricken and guiding the quick." If such was said, before there was any evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin, and while there was overwhelming evidence of a conspiracy, then the White House is in the interesting position of being the first to designate Oswald as the assassin and the first to have ruled out in the face of impressive evidence to the contrary, that there could have been a conspiracy.

Now, Mr. Salinger, let us face up to the plain fact that foreign intelligence services monitored that series of conversations and have long since broken the code. That tape is being denied only to the American public.... Will you render this service to civilian rule and democracy for which President Kennedy gave his life?

Respectfully yours,
(signed)
Vincent J.
Salandria

Far from dismissing Salandria's letter, Salinger replied rather cordially on December 26, and indicated:

The section of my book dealing with the conversations between the White House and the Cabinet plane were taken from a transcript of the tape of those conversations made by the White House Communication Agency. I have never either read or heard the tape to which Mr. White refers, i.e., the conversations with Air Force One. Since the tape with which I worked was provided by the White House Communication Agency, it would seem to me that the tape of the conversation to which you refer would emanate from the same source, if such a tape, in fact, exists.

As to the conversation with the cabinet plane, the transcript of that conversation is in my personal files which have been turned over to the National Archives for placement in the Kennedy Library.

I certainly have no objection to your seeing that transcript, although the National Archives will undoubtedly write and ask my permission since it is included in my personal papers.

Sincerely yours,
(signed)
Pierre Salinger

Again Salandria wrote to Bahmer, this time requesting that Bahmer write to Salinger for authorization for Salandria to see the transcript to which Salinger referred. Again Bahmer replied:

After receipt of your letter of December 28, a careful examination was made of the papers that Mr. Salinger has sent to us for storage. We have not, however, been able to find anything in the nature of a transcript of the tape recording that you are searching for.

I regret that our reply to your inquiries, therefore, must still be in the negative.

Salandria then wrote directly to the [White House Communication Agency](#) requesting access to the tape recording of communication between Air Force One and Washington and after a lengthy wait received the following:

January 2, 1968

Dear Mr. Salandria:

I have been asked to respond to your letter, addressed to the White House Communication Agency, concerning a tape recording to Air Force One, November 22, 1963.

Logs and tapes of the radio transmissions of military aircraft, including those of Air Force One, are kept for official use only. These tapes are not releasable, nor are they obtainable from commercial sources.

I am sorry my response cannot be more favorable.

Respectfully,
(signed)
James U. Cross
Armed Forces Aide
to the President

A tape and transcript to which White and Salinger respectively had had access had apparently disappeared. And despite the fact that at the time of their writings both individuals were private citizens and used access to the tape and transcript for commercial purposes, it appeared that where Salandria was concerned these materials were classified.

Could Theodore H. White have been mistaken? Has any other testimony surfaced which might corroborate White's report? In 1993 there appeared "[Let Us Begin Anew](#)": *An Oral History of the Kennedy Presidency*, by Gerald S. and Deborah H. Strober, and on [pages 450-51](#) one finds the following remarks by Assistant Secretary of State Robert Manning, who was aboard the Cabinet plane with Salinger:

We took off from Honolulu in one of the presidential aircraft and were several hundred miles west of there. Several cabinet secretaries were with us, as was Pierre Salinger. I had been in the press, so I knew by the sound that there was a flash on the news ticker. I walked toward the communications area, and the sergeant had a piece of wire copy in his hand. He said, "The secretary [Rusk] will have to see this." It was a flash saying: Dallas. President Kennedy shot." Then a bulletin: "Perhaps shot fatally." we took it to Rusk and he asked me to bring the cabinet secretaries to his compartment.

We immediately got on the phone with the White House Situation Room. They confirmed that something had happened and that the President had been rushed to the hospital. Rusk got on the

public address system and told everybody we had some bad, unclear news: President Kennedy had been wounded, and we were going to turn back. Salinger got in touch with the White House and used his code name. He said, "This is Wayside. What word do you have on Lancer?" At the other end the fellow said, "Lancer is dead." Rusk then went back on the PA system and said, "I am sorry to have to bring you this grievous news, but President Kennedy has been killed. We now have a new president. May God bless our president and the United States of America."

The news then came in that someone named Oswald who had been in the Soviet Union had done this.

Salandria's search for the elusive tape and transcript had proved futile. Years later the government would release what it claimed was the tape in question but with large gaps and sections missing. Nevertheless, Salandria persisted in his search for internal documentation of the premature identification of Oswald as the lone assassin and early foreclosure of an investigation by the government. Eventually as a result of the [House Select Committee on Assassinations](#) investigation, two memoranda surfaced which documented exactly this. The following is the full text of these memoranda written by Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. In reading these memoranda one must remember that Mr. Katzenbach was serving Attorney General Robert Kennedy. They therefore indicate that very early on the Kennedy forces were prepared to cooperate with the cover-up.

Memorandum for Mr. Moyers

It is important that all of the facts surrounding President Kennedy's assassination be made public in a way which will satisfy people in the United States and abroad that all the facts have been told and that a statement to this effect be made now.

1. The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial.
2. Speculation about Oswald's motivation ought to be cut off, and we should have some basis for rebutting thought that this was a Communist conspiracy or (as the Iron Curtain press is saying) a right-wing conspiracy to blame it on the Communists. Unfortunately the facts on Oswald seem about too pat — too obvious (Marxist, Cuba, Russian wife, etc.). The Dallas police have put out statements on the Communist conspiracy theory, and it was they who were in charge when he was shot and thus silenced.
3. The matter has been handled thus far with neither dignity nor conviction. Facts have been mixed with rumor and speculation. We can scarcely let the world see us totally in the image of the Dallas police when our President is murdered.

I think this objective may be satisfied by making public as soon as possible a complete and thorough FBI report on Oswald and the assassination. This may run into the difficulty of pointing to inconsistencies between this report and statements by Dallas police officials. But the reputation of the Bureau is such that it may do the whole job.

The only other step would be the appointment of a Presidential Commission of unimpeachable

personnel to review and examine the evidence and announce its conclusions. This has both advantages and disadvantages. I think it can await publication of the FBI report and public reaction to it here and abroad.

I think, however, that a statement that all the facts will be made public property in an orderly and responsible way should be made now. We need something to head off public speculation or Congressional hearings of the wrong sort.

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach
Deputy Attorney General[1]

* * * * *

December 9, 1963

The Chief Justice
The Supreme Court
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Chief Justice:

At the direction of President Johnson, I am transmitting herewith to you and the other members of the Commission copies of the report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the assassination of President Kennedy and on the subsequent shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. You will note that in some aspects the Investigation is continuing and further information will be made available to the Commission as it develops. The Secret Service and the Department of State have also prepared reports with respect to the preparation made to guard the President and certain background information in the hands of the State Department with respect to Oswald. You will have these promptly.

The report is not a classified document since it does not contain defense information. However, we have been treating it as a highly classified document and I trust that you and the other members of the Commission will do likewise until such time as you determine to release matters contained within it. Within the Government it is being read by a very limited number of people on a "need to know" basis.

You will recall that at the time of announcing the Federal Bureau of Investigation investigation, and prior to the appointment of the Commission, President Johnson announced that the FBI report would be made public. I have, however, informed him of your request that this report not be released until the Commission has had time to review all of the facts and evaluate them. At the same time I am sure you are aware that there is such public speculation and rumor in this connection, which it would be desirable to allay as quickly as possible. For example, the latest Gallup poll shows that over half the American people believe that Oswald acted as part of a conspiracy in shooting President Kennedy, and there is considerable rumor in this country and abroad to the effect that Ruby acted as part of the same or a related conspiracy.

I think, therefore, the Commission should consider releasing — or allowing the Department of

justice to release — a short press statement which would briefly make the following points:

(1) The FBI report through scientific examination of evidence, testimony and intensive investigation, establishes beyond a reasonable doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald shot President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. The evidence includes ballistic tests, fingerprints and palm prints, clothing fibers and other technical data which places Oswald at the scene of the crime and establishes that he fired the shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally of Texas.

(2) The FBI has made an exhaustive investigation into whether Oswald may have conspired with or been assisted by any organization, group or person, foreign or domestic, in carrying out this dastardly act. In this regard, the FBI has questioned hundreds of persons and checked out numerous rumors and reports. To date this aspect of the investigation has been negative. No evidence has been uncovered indicating that any organization, group or person, including Dallas night club owner, Jack Ruby, was involved with Oswald in the assassination of President Kennedy, or that the subsequent shooting of Oswald was part of a conspiracy.

I would be happy to discuss any of the matters contained in this letter or in the report with you or other members of the Commission at any time you should desire. I am, of course, always at your service.

Sincerely yours,
(signed)
Nicholas deB. Katzenbach
Deputy Attorney General[2]

Notes

1. [↔] Memorandum to Bill Moyers, Press Secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, from Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, written November 25, 1963, three days after the assassination of President Kennedy; report from *Hearings Before the Select Committee on Assassinations of the United States House of Representatives*, 95th Congress, 2nd Session, [Volume 3](#), pp. 566-68.

[See pages [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#) of a copy of this memorandum from a segment of a FBI file: “62-109090 File (Headquarters Warren Commission),” “11-25-63 Katzenbach to Moyers, w/Evans to Belmont cover (62-109090-1st NR 2)”. A local-to-ratical [PDF copy](#) is replicated from [History Matters](#)’ section on [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#).

The full title of the twelve volumes of hearings is:

INVESTIGATION OF THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY: HEARINGS BEFORE THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION, SEPTEMBER 18, 19, 20, AND 21, 1976

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2. [↔] Letter to Chief Justice Earl Warren from Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, written twenty days after the assassination of President Kennedy; rpt. from *Hearings Before the Select Committee on Assassinations*, [Volume 3](#), pp. 674-76.